



"Hey,
You.....
Silver Crow."

「なあ、あんた……」

シルバー・クロウ」

キリト

どこからともなく
学内ローカルネットに出現した、
謎の剣士タイプアバター

"Who are
you.....!?
How
exactly
did you
connect
to the
Umesato
Local
Network!?"

「誰なんだ……!?
いったい、どうやって梅郷中の
ローカルネットに接続した!？」

Chapter 3 - Versus

Roppongi, 2026

"Heh..... So this is the «4th-Generation FullDive Experimental Unit»."

I muttered while looking up at the huge enshrined hexahedron in front of me.

The bare aluminum surface was shining dully, with growling sounds from several of the large cooling fans that were lined up. One side of it was linked to the gel bed, the headrest was covered by a protruding crude helmet-based interface.

"So huge, weren't the machines used in the early days of the amusement parks smaller than this, Higa-san?"

I turned around and said to the man at the control console. The operator raised his face, shrugged and replied,

"Even so, Kirigaya-kun, this is already compact compared to the original estimate. Besides, the specs of the first generation at the olden days' game centers weren't much different from Mega Drive or Dream Cast."

".....I never saw either of the real machines though....."

"Well, then let's have life songs! This time at my apartment, it'll be a strictly reggae camp....."

And the man who blurted out strange things was —— Higa Takeru, the researcher responsible for the development of the world's state-of-the-art VR machine. Looking at him from the outside, it would be hard to believe, as his hairstyle stuck out thinly like a pin holder, he wore big rounded glasses, and his T-shirt had a game character printed on it. It would be 100 times more matching for him to be in the vicinity of the shops in Akihabara^[1] than this gloomy hi-tech room.

But even though I say that, I was still in uniform after school time too.

Why was I —— Kirigaya Kazuto, here at the harbor ward in Roppongi, in the laboratory of a certain venture company? The reason was simple, it was just a part-time job.

From the first-generation of the large scale amusement machine, to the 2nd-generation Nerve Gear or AmuSphere, then to the 3rd-generation medical equipment, the FullDive machines have evolved. Of course, anyone can use it, but there were some with a certain degree of

adaptability. That is, their brains could connect to the machine with a high efficiency rate. And in addition to the innate aptitude, the experience could be improved during a long Dive.

Then in Japan, no, the entire world, the group of people who held the longest Dive time was without a doubt, the «Survivors» from «SAO incident» which concluded one and a half years ago.

This 4th-generation machine has been developed under the leadership of Higa Takeru, the level of connection precision was overwhelming compared to the machines up until now. That high specs led to the unexpected problem. Because the amount of information that had to be exchanged with the brain was too great, even with all the staff including Higa-san himself, they were unable to collect data from the test Dive to a satisfactory level due to the «VR Sickness» — was what he said.

At that point, Higa-san used a certain connection to request one of the «Survivors», me, to be a test Diver as a part-time job, I came here to Roppongi after I confirmed the daily wages, and that was it.

"——Anyway, I am to FullDive with this, then once in there I just move here and there, right?"

I asked for affirmation while stroking the chilled aluminum exterior, Higa-san nodded in consent.

"Oh, I need to warn you that I can see the graphics inside just as you do, like a voyeur. As I'm still developing the mechanism to adjust the connection depth in accordance to a Diver's ability, someone has to dive, or else I can't get the data, hahaha."

".....Well, because I get paid, doing anything is fine.....but before that, I need affirmation for one thing please."

I glanced at the strong headgear interface and continued,

"Erm, there won't be any danger during the Dive..... Is that right?"

"Of course of course of course!"

Higa-san nodded deeply after saying that three times.

"Kirigaya-kun is an SAO survivor, I understand your feelings. It's alright, danger from the machine developed by me, there's only a little!"

"Is that so, I'm relieved to hear tha..."

Swallowing the words I was about to say, I looked at Higa-san again.

".....«there's only a little»?"

"Nonono, It's alright It's alright It's alright!"

After saying that three times each, Higa-san continued in a rapid whisper.

".....Just that, if the power dropped during the Dive, then 'that' for a moment....."

"What is 'that'.....?"

"Nono, no problem! We have two support power sources, and an emergency battery is already equipped too!"

"Please explain 'that' instead....."

"Nonono, no problem! There's no real harm! It just, erm, a bit, how to say it....."

Higa-san rolled his eyes behind the rounded glasses while stepped closer, my glance was fixed on him.

".....How to say it, well, it might appear, just that."

".....What will appear?"

"Hahaha, it's not good Kirigaya-kun. There are things we must not talk about, like bonuses or toilets. In a place like this, the thing that will appear is of course 'that', hahaha."

After saying that, Higa-san hung both hands loosely in front of his chest. That behavior finally let my brain realize what 'that' means.

"Hah.....? G..Ghost.....?"

What is this person saying?, I thought while still staring at Higa-san, who shook his head again and said,

"It's real, very real, Kirigaya-kun! I actually saw it!Well, as you can see, this experimental unit is still the only machine in the world, so there is only a single person during the Dive. But..... the staff saw a silhouette of a person on the grass many times during the test field dive."

Higa-san said with an expression that should have the thin vertical lines over his forehead if this was a manga. [\[2\]](#)

I had a serious look for a moment, then it was replaced by a bitter smile. I shrugged my shoulders.

"It must be because of the VR sickness, probably the illusions from light effect? Or it could be a bug in the shader program."

"No—! There is no way such a bug could appear in the program this genius Higa had participated in creating!"

For some reason, his tone suddenly changed to be like a foreigner's, but I ignored it and moved my shoulders again.

"Still, the ghost didn't even come out to this room..... About ghosts appearing in the VR world, while in Aincrad when I heard rumors and went to check, it was just an NPC anyway."

That of course, was about the existence of the top-down^[3] AI «Yui» who was my and Asuna's «Daughter». She would get angry if I tell her that I was searching for a ghost at first.

".....In other words, everything seen in the other side is all digital code, the existence must be written somewhere in the memory address. By examining the log of the corresponding test Diving time, you can see what the Diver saw....."

After I said that, Higa-san made a pointed mouth like a child.

"Of course I checked it, but there was nothing in the log. Which means, it was certainly not an object from the main program of the experimental machine. Then it was really a ghost, or....."

".....Or?"

".....Err, this talk is at the level Kirigaya-kun is not supposed to know, so don't let anyone know you heard it, alright?"

With a strict preface, Higa-san continued,

"At the heart of this experimental machine is «Quantum Operation Circuit», the so-called quantum computer."

".....That was also Higa-san's creation?"

"Oh yea, was what I wanted to say, but its basic foundation was actually what Kayaba-senpai left behind. Well anyway, it is possible that the quantum computer could interfere with a parallel world, well..... the Sci-Fi world."

".....That..is really true?"

The tone in my question had changed, Higa-san, half agreeing and half disagreeing, shook his head.

"I hope I know that for certain too, but if it's true, then it would explain the ghost phenomenon. That is, this experimental machine, for some reason....., interfered with the same kind of the machine in the past or the future from a different time flow, then it could be possible to see the shadow of another Diver....."

".....Somehow this is very different from a real ghost, isn't it"

I shrugged my shoulder again, then glanced at the clock at the wall.

"Appearing or not, we will only know during the Dive anyway.Today my little sister will make something, I will be in trouble if I came back after dinner time. So let's start....."

"Heh, Kirigaya-kun has little sisters!? How many!?"

Higa-san's reaction made me feel a strange sense of déjà vu^[4], I ignored the question and sat on the bed of the experimental machine. I lay my body to fit its recesses then slid my head inside the headgear.

"OK, I'm ready."

I said to Higa-san, whose face still showed lingering disappointment. Closing my eyes, the sound of a motor could be heard, the final explanation reached my ears,

".....Then, commencing connection. Avatar will be Kirigaya-kun's «Self-image» that is automatically generated, so it won't cause discomfort."

"Understood."

I raised my left thumb in response. At the same time, a low growl could be heard from the back of the experimental machine.

—————*Again.*

Feeling strange fluctuations in his field of vision, Arita Haruyuki narrowed the eyes of his pink pig avatar.

«Burst Link» command allows one to enter the world dyed in transparent blue, the basic accelerated space «Blue World».

Equipped in Haruyuki's neck was the quantum communication device «Neuro Linker». And installed even deeper inside was the mystery application «Brain Burst». When FullDiving in this transparent blue field, the BB program accelerates Haruyuki's command reactions one thousand fold.

The basic accelerated space was for searching the matching list to find opponents, or to start external applications to do various work, the reason for Haruyuki being «Accelerated» was for the latter. That was —— for the submission of today's homework, to be more precise, the postponed time left was fifteen real life minutes. The Japanese history class during the fifth period had given out the report homework, and of course, the storage region of his brain had forgotten about it even after he registered it in the scheduler application.

Because this was neither mathematics nor English homework, the last resort of asking Takumu or Chiyuri for their homework photograph in order to copy it wasn't an option —— Even though the costly loan, without a doubt, would be collected later —— it was better than having to write the essay report.

Therefore, consuming a precious 1 burst point to «Accelerate», he battered intently at the holographic keyboard. However,

His thoughts shook and swayed when he lifted his face due to the odd observation reflected in his field of vision, in the middle of the empty blue classroom,

".....What.....?"

He muttered when his avatar dropped from the chair. He stared ahead a few steps between the rows of the desk, and part of the blackboard waved faintly again. It was —— like there was something transparent moving between Haruyuki and the blackboard.

In fact, this wasn't his first time coming in contact with such phenomenon. Recently, here —— about a month ago, sometimes during FullDive he could see the strange fluctuations as well. Moreover, it wasn't in the normal VR world, only while «Accelerated».

However, today's clarity of the phenomenon was unusual. Haruyuki had forgotten about his homework, he stared intently.

Then he immediately noticed something.

".....A person?"

Yes, a fluctuation at the spot in the classroom looked like the silhouette of a human, as if there was a completely transparent human standing there.

But that shouldn't be the case.

The blue basic accelerated space was, as a general rule, the world only for a person who uttered the «Burst Link» command. For two or more to Dive at the same time, both sides must be using a direct connection on the Neuro Linker and use the accelerate command at the same time. But of course, at the moment, Haruyuki wasn't directly connected to anyone.

.....That means.

".....G..Ghost?"

Scared by the word he inadvertently murmured. Haruyuki tried to retreat to the back of the classroom, but at that time.

The clear shadow started approaching him at the same time!

"Hi,hiiii—!!"

Screaming, while dashing back at a high speed, he unconsciously tried to shout the acceleration halt command.

"B-B-B-B-Burst Ou....."

But he stopped his steps at that point.

This is not the real world, it is the polygon world created by the image of the Neuro Linkers from the social cameras. Everything reflected in the eyes are all the digital data which could be substituted with the code. Therefore, there must be a reason for the existence of that shadow too, there is no ghost, ghost is just a lie.

Haruyuki thought recklessly while hiding behind the last row of the desk. *Something that looks like human shadow —— what is it? There must be a way to verify it. Assuming it is just other human, this is not a normal VR space but the accelerated space, I didn't Burst Link with that «Someone». Then if I connect to the network with the same Burst Linker——*

"T-That's right..... T-T-The name will come up from the Matching List."

Haruyuki murmured with dry lips. He then quickly hit the «B» icon displayed at the top left of the virtual desktop, the Brain Burst Console screen expanded, he moved the tab to open the Matching List.

On top of the list is my name, then it should be the classmates Takumu «Cyan Pile» and Chiyuri «Lime Bell». In addition, at the lounge of the school cafeteria, is KuroyukiHime^[5] «Black Lotus». These four are the only existing Burst Linkers in this Umesato middle school.

Yet.

Floating on the fifth row, the wriggled set of dots was blurred like it was written in ink.

That spot of light, for some reason, didn't take form of the characters immediately. Haruyuki held his breath and watched while trembling intensely, then, he blinked — a few alphabets finally formed.

There was a fixed form to the Duel Avatar's name, but that name didn't take the «Color Name» form, it was just a row of six characters.

"K.....I, R, I....., T.....O.....?"

——Kirito?

Who is he.....?

As if to trace his thoughts, Haruyuki's right hand automatically moved.

He hit the mysterious Burst Linker name, «KIRITO», causing the «DUEL» option to pop through the window, then touched the «YES» affirmation dialog.

The blue classroom melted and disappeared as if it collapsed.

While passing through the space of darkness, Haruyuki's pig avatar was surrounded by the light and changed its shape, The big helmet with thin limbs, silvery white Duel Avatar «Silver Crow».

On both sides of the upper part of his vision, green stamina gauges extended, and the «1800» time count was engraved in the middle.

And finally the flaming text «FIGHT» shone brightly before exploding.

Once his stiff feet touched the surface of the battlefield, Haruyuki quickly raised his face.

'Someone' stood in front, slightly away from him.

Duel Avatar — no, that isn't it. He thought.

As far as Haruyuki knew, the avatar of each Burst Linker had the appearance of a robot-like hardness. While some wore cloth, there were no flesh and blood faces across the board.

But this 'someone' who stood in front of him clearly had a human's appearance.

A male, with slightly long hair, his sharp eyes were jet black. He seemed to be slightly older than Haruyuki, wearing a black leather longcoat, thimble gloves on his hands, and boots on his feet. Then —— suspended on his back were two long swords.

".....Swords!?"

Murmuring in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki put some more distance between them.

There was no mistake, it was familiar in the fantasy game genre, the so-called «Long Sword». The handles were black and silvery white respectively, Although they were polygons, he could tell from the radiance of the texture that they would be very heavy. He felt that the presence of blades within those scabbards were genuine.

That was not a Duel Avatar, but he didn't think it was the harmless FullDive avatar either.

While cautiously observing his opponent, Haruyuki took a deep breath and shouted,

"Who are you.....!? How exactly did you connect to the Umesato Local Network!?"

The voice tinged with effect echoed throughout the field, but the black dressed swordsman was still motionless.

Disregard that —— rather, it was as if the voice wasn't received in the first place.

Looking closely, the outline of the swordsman avatar was misted like smoke, was it disembodied? —— Was it just the image being sent from somewhere? Haruyuki thought that, and to verify it, he took a step closer.

At the same moment, the swordsman made his move too. The black shiny boot made a step forward, it stepped on the small pebble on the stage ground, causing a sound.

"———!!"

Not the virtual image!

Haruyuki jumped backwards in panic again, he raised both hands in a guarding stance.

As if being induced by that movement, tension ran through the face of the swordsman, his right hand quickly grabbed the handle of the black sword behind his back.

——*Where exactly is this place?*

——*And, who is that!?*

I earnestly kept repeating these two questions in my mind.

The prior lecture from the operator, Higa-san, was that the Dive field would be a peaceful grassland, but the scenery spread around me was the complete opposite.

The cracked ground, the concrete buildings that had partly collapsed, flames came out of their openings, And —— the starless night sky. It was just like the world after civilization had collapsed.

If the only existence here was me, it would be just an error in the quantum circuit, which I suspected caused my consciousness to jump to the future Tokyo. But fortunately, there was a human shadow just a few meters in front of me.

The silhouette was surely human's, the head was like a big helmet, all of the body was covered in metal armor. The reflection from the bonfire sparkled on that silvery body, which was very slender compared to its big head. It was unthinkable that there would be a human inside it. Further more, its back was carrying something that looked like the radiating fins.

"Robot.....?"

I murmured. As I stepped closer to verify it, the sole of my boots stepped on some rubble causing a sound.

At that moment, the silvery robot quickly jumped backwards —— both hands moved forward into a guarding position.

It had no weapons, but the tip of its sharp fingers glittered. It would be plausible that it had some strong weapons hidden. When I thought that, my right hand moved automatically over my shoulder, grabbing the grip of the sword hung on my back.

——*Sword?*

Then I finally realized that I wasn't Kirigaya Kazuto, the high school student in the real world, but Kirito, the swordsman from the nostalgic SAO period.

Higa said that when I dive, the avatar would be created from my self-image. In other word, currently I wasn't in my own flesh and blood body, but the «Black Swordsman» which shouldn't exist anywhere anymore, I almost made a bitter smile at this thought. However, I wasn't in the situation to do that. Why did the mysterious robot make that stance with both hands? Right, I also grabbed the handle of my sword. I was in a somewhat dangerous situation with this robot.

If I pulled out the sword like this, the robot would attack without a doubt. But it would be hard to prevent that while I'm standing in this awkward form anyway. The fighting spirit is emitting from it and such things don't exist in soulless NPC or monsters. In other word, there must be a real human moving it.

Within the intense atmosphere, I decided to take a chance with words,

".....Um, who are you? This place is my company's closed network. Where are you from and for what purpose are you connecting here?"

But there was no answer, Looks as if that thing can't hear my voice, then how about gesturing? But to do that in this situation would be difficult. If I move my right hand even slightly, the robot in front of me might jump immediately. The tension of the atmosphere in the space between us is so tense.

——*Yeah, I was in the wrong the moment I grabbed my sword, but you are a bit too aggressive too!*

That was what I complained in my mind. The silvery robot had penetrated the company's protective firewall into the experimental machine, it was clearly illegal hacking. Then wouldn't it be more appropriate to be a bit more sneaky.....

When I thought to this point.

After a long time, I finally noticed the indicators fixed at the top of my field of vision.

At the center was the digital figure, the current [1740] had been decreased by one second. Then on both sides, the green shining bars, lined up in parallel with the thin blue bars.

Under the left side bar was the engraved character string [KIRITO]. No matter how I look at it, it was my name —— The Login ID I passed to Higa-san before the Dive.

Then under the right bar was the brightly shining [SILVER CROW] name.

"Silver.....Crow....."

I soundlessly murmured that, it was no doubt the name of the silvery robot in front of me.

The components of this 'screen', and this situation.

I widened my eyes to the revelation that I suddenly realized.

This is —— this world is clearly not the peaceful test field at all.

It was a «Battle Field». Currently I was in a nostalgic fighting game, I Dived into the so-called KakuGē!^[6]

Higa-san said there was a certain degree of possibility that the quantum circuit mounted within the experimental machine could interfere with the world on a different time flow. If so, then this place may be the world in 1990's era when fighting games were at its peak? No, it can't be. For that era, the 'F' of the FullDive didn't even exist yet. Then is this the future? I don't know how many years into the future, but fighting games will be back in the spotlight in the future?

"Hey, You.....Silver Crow."

Forgetting the fact that my voice wouldn't reach my opponent, I continued saying,

"Is this place within a fighting game? What is the title.....?"

While I was asking,

I carelessly stepped forward while my hand was still on the grip of my sword.

The reaction was —— immediate.

The left foot of the silvery robot avatar kicked the ground, and while I was surprised, the thin body closed in on my bosom like a streak of lightning.

The left foot had decided due to its own reflexes, and a corner in Haruyuki's head yelled *Crap*—.

The approaching action of the opponent might not have been for attacking purposes, as the sword wasn't pulled out, and he wasn't even in a proper stance with his bosom wide open.

But it was no longer possible to cancel the ultra high speed attack command set by Haruyuki's consciousness. The Silver Crow avatar rushed in at full speed, and threw a preemptive right middle kick aimed towards the flank of the swordsman dressed in black.

Originally, Haruyuki's fighting style wasn't this decisively aggressive. Looking at how he fought his early opponents, he seemed to be gradually changing based on attributes and techniques he gained over time.

In addition, the one in front of him, the strange duel avatar without a color name and with his exposed flesh and blood face, his only feature was the black covering his entire body. If it were red or blue, he might have been controlled from somewhere close by, however, this wasn't the case for black. He should have asked KuroyukiHime-senpai for the characteristics of «Black», but since he was already in the confrontation, it was too late now.

Even against an opponent with unknown characteristics, Haruyuki's preemptive attack with just an insignificant action was ——— clearly, the swordsman in black, «KIRITO»'s tremendous pressure's fault.

If anything, his slender physique, the still developing face that could be called a boy's, but just how he was standing with his hand on the sword grip made Haruyuki's throat dry from the constant feeling of intense pressure. It was likely from a level 7 or 8 High Ranker ——— no, higher than that, probably the tension of facing those «Kings» one-on-one.

If the mysterious swordsman had opened a small chance, Haruyuki would rather retreat to hide and ascertain the situation in the narrow path of the «End of the Century» stage. But there was nothing that could be called an opening from the swordsman ——— «Kirito». Haruyuki was afraid that his head might fly off from a sudden attack if he tried to retreat, however slightly.

Therefore, as soon as Kirito had taken a casual step, Haruyuki charged ahead with all of his outburst energy.

——*But, things have already reached this point, then there's no other choice!*

Haruyuki swallowed the depressing thought the moment he drew up the kick.

When facing a fellow Burst Linker, do not «Battle» earnestly. That was what his teacher, and at the same time his 'parent', Black Lotus had taught him. If the middle right kick strikes, it would disrupt the opponent's stance, then the rest would be just to continue rushing at close range without giving any chance for him to pull the sword from his back. And finishing him

off with an aerial dive attack when the special move gauge had accumulated to the halfway point.

The first attack loaded with those kind of intentions passed through the opponent's abdomen like a silvery arc in the dark night——

With a light sound, only a button of the coat went flying into the sky.

"Wh....."

While adjusting his balance, Haruyuki forcibly exhaled.

It's impossible. Given the short interval, and that he wasn't in a proper stance, blocking should be difficult enough, but he evaded it completely.

Haruyuki eyes wide opened in confusion. At the same time, the boy's right arm flashed, and with a bright metallic sound, he drew out his jet black long sword.

It was at an amazing speed.

The silvery white avatar «Silver Crow»'s rush with his middle right kick slipped past my abdomen, its movement was ultra smooth as if it had been repeatedly practiced thousands of times.

However, due to its smoothness, I could feel where the first attack was aimed at.

The one moving Silver Crow was a living human, there's no mistake about it. Then, when the human operates the avatar, there will be the tiny bits of information exposed from its movement which didn't exist in monsters. The significant ones are heart beats, toe direction, waist height, and gaze.

For a duel in SAO, it would be fatal to get hit by a single strike, so it was very important to read the opponent's movement in advance. Therefore when needing to fight with an evenly skilled person, any move fired from a long distance must be avoided at almost a hundred percent rate. Jumping moves need to be blocked, as evading might leave an opening, and a favorite special move is sure to be inserted in between the flow of continuous attacks that followed.

From that perspective, the Silver Crow's middle kick speed was, without a doubt, marvelous. But its movements gave out too much information at the initial moments, I could feel the intention to hit my left flank, so I dashed backwards with all my strength. Settling it with just a single coat button sent flying was already considered lucky.

It seemed like Crow didn't expect the attack to be evaded, the swing caused the upper part of the body to lose its balance. That was a good opportunity, because, even though I positively thought it wasn't a situation I should fight in, my right hand automatically moved to pull out one of my beloved swords — «Elucidator».

"Shi....."

While feeling the nostalgic weight in my hand, I quickly swung down the sword. With a thin band of blue light, the blade cut into Silver Crow's right shoulder.

"Ah....."

Haruyuki let leak a weak sound, staring at the looming sharp edge.

Unable to evade, and it couldn't be blocked with an arm either. Kirito's motion from drawing the sword until slashing didn't look powerful at all, it looked so natural, yet the enormous amount of power that was put on the blade made Haruyuki feel like receiving an electric shock through his avatar.

The metallic colors, like Silver Crow, had some resistance to slashing attacks. But he felt it was of no use against this sword, so in that case, he had to make sure to take minimal damage from it.

Although the battle had just begun, Haruyuki's consciousness had started to «Hyper Accelerate» as if he was already at the edge of the jaws of death. The closing blade seemed to slow down slightly, Haruyuki bent his knees, dropping his avatar down at the same time as the incoming slashing vector. The black shiny blade touched his right shoulder's armor, causing pretty orange sparks to fly in all directions. As he had expected, the sword wouldn't stop there, the crack ripped apart Haruyuki's silver armor faster than the speed at which he descended, one centimeter, two centimeters was cut by the blade. At this rate even if he fell down to the ground, the sword wouldn't stop and his right arm would surely be cut off.
——But,

".....Now!!!"

The HP gauge was reduced by the damage to the shoulder, and a similar proportion of the special move gauge had filled up with a shiny glow. Haruyuki then converted it to flying force, the silver wings took shape in the form of commas on his back.

At that time, the falling posture gained backwards thrust——

Silver Crow body had only slid by fifty centimeters, but the sword had separated from the cut in the right shoulder.

".....Oooooo!!!"

Roaring, Haruyuki kicked the ground with all his might, and jumped a large distance back.

——*What happened!?*

Feeling the impact from the point of sword biting into empty ground, I held my breath.

The black blade of the Elucidator had caught the shoulder of Silver Crow, there was no mistake about it. It hit the seams of the armor I aimed at, and I was sure just a breath more and it would have been cut off. But the silvery robot suddenly gained backwards momentum and fled away with a cut wound about two centimeters deep.

Such behavior wouldn't be possible in that situation. That completely different movement, it was as if it was being pulled from the back with some wires.

I looked up quickly, staring at the more than ten meters in distance the avatar took in just the blink of an eye.

Of course, there were no wires attached to its body, and I couldn't see any opening Jet holes either.

——*No.*

Folded on the back of Crow were thin metal fins. Did they tremble a split second before the back dash?

If the secret behind the impossible maneuver was those fins, then my initial assumption that they were radiating fins was incorrect —— It must be some sort of propulsion system. But if that was the case, why didn't it use them from the start?

When I thought up to that point, I noticed a slight change from all sorts of information displayed in my field of vision.

First, the Silver Crow's stamina gauge on the upper right had decreased a little, around three percent.

Then, my stamina gauge on the upper left was still full, and the thin blue gauge beneath it had slightly emitted light.

So this field was in compliance with those antique fighting games like I expected, the meaning of the blue gauge was obvious. The «Special Move», no doubt about it. Then this gauge probably charges based on the amount of damage taken. In other word, when Silver Crow was damaged by my sword, the gauge began to accumulate at the same moment, I suspect consuming it created a driving force from the fins on its back. Conversely, if it couldn't charge the special move gauge, Silver Crow wouldn't be able to use those fins anymore.

——But, in that case, what was my «Special Move» when I didn't have that kind of equipment on my back?

Now that I was using the avatar of «Dual Blades» Kirito and with the two beloved swords, my self-image — In other words, it was created from my memory. If they worked in this fighting game's system, the special moves should be awakened from my memory as well. Then, asking what I will take as special move, I can promptly reply. It's nothing other than «Sword Skill».

I put my right foot forward, set the sword behind, and assumed a basic one-handed straight sword skill «Sonic Leap» stance. Doing so caused the sword to growl faintly, at the same time the shining part of the special move gauge blinked, and then abruptly stopped. This meant the gauge wasn't enough to use the move.

".....I get it now."

I murmured while looking again at the opponent in front of me.

From the reaction of Silver Crow, and from the scene composition, I was apparently the trespasser in this situation.....no, «Intruder» was a more suitable term. It seemed Crow played in this game stage daily, and I, no, the 4th-generation experimental machine's quantum circuit had interfered. I wanted to immediately log out and complain a great deal to Higa for making such a dangerous thing, but there was no log out button in the field of vision, and I didn't know any commands for those purposes either.

But since this was inside a fighting game, once the «Battle» had ended, the connection should be cut off.

If that was the case, it wasn't my hobby to stand still eating the attacks until my stamina gauge was completely depleted either.

Why? I was the «Intruder». It is an appropriate manner to break through using my full power, isn't it?

Since I have been thrown out into this stage, my mouth made a faint smile for the first time.

The switch inside my head made a 'click' changing sound.

The moment the unknown identity Burst Linker «Kirito» made a little smile, Haruyuki felt goosebumps on his virtual skin. The pain from his right shoulder's wound suddenly disappeared.

Holding his ground against the intense pressure that blew by, the desire to retreat rose up within him.

Kirito had intruded the Umesato Local Network, but it was Haruyuki who saw the name in the matching list and applied the duel mode. Picking the fight then retreating wasn't an option for him, as a member of the legion «Nega Nebulas».

——This is not a situation to be scared of! If we can't talk, then the only way to collect information from him is to use fists directly —— but since that side has a sword —— is there any other way?

At the same time he heard himself saying that, he felt something burning deep inside him.

Kirito's reaction to avoid his full speed middle kick was the fastest he had ever seen fighting with duel avatars up until this point. Wanting to see that movement again, and then surpassing it.

Clenching both his fists hard, Haruyuki decided to rush in again while lowering his body.

The big moves from long distances absolutely wouldn't hit. In addition, the sword had the advantage in reach. If he could slip into the zero distance, he could use small moves to disrupt the opponent's stance.

The sword which looked very heavy shouldn't be able to be swung consecutively. There should be a chance to close in if he could avoid its attack and match it with a counter.

——Keep focusing. Prepare to evade the attack coming from the point of the sword.

The gear in Haruyuki consciousness stepped up, at the same time, his field of vision narrowed down to focus on just the center. All his senses focused onto the tip of the shiny black long sword.

".....Nowww!!"

Yelling, Haruyuki kicked the ground.

Lowering his posture to the limit, he shortened the ten meters distance at once.

Kirito's sword slid down halfway from the beginning middle position.

From the bottom. The point of the sword sent sparks flying over the ground while it slashed upwards to intercept Haruyuki, who was leaning forward. It was like the lethal fangs of the jet black snake——

Haruyuki opened only his left wing, causing his body to rotate almost 90 degrees and avoiding the attack. Even without the gauge, he can still use it to control his posture.

The sword groaned as it was raised, as it made a shallow cut on Silver Crow's chest armor. Heat and light that were at the tip of the sword disappeared shortly. At that moment Haruyuki stepped using his right foot with all his strength, his body raised for a right uppercut, a silvery light covered fist went straight for Kirito's abdomen——

It was parried just before it could strike. The right fist flowed to the outside, only grazing the shoulder.

But that was still within the calculations. Now both Kirito's hands couldn't return in time. The left short hook was thrown into the body that was left wide open. 'Don', he felt positive feedback. The body wrapped by the coat had stopped.

——*It hit!*

Now rush!!

"Oooo!!"

Haruyuki shouted and at the same time attacked using his right knee, which also hit. The damage wasn't good as the result of the distance which was too short, but it was good enough. Judging the conditions using consecutive moves while the opponent's movement was sealed, then deciding with a blow.

Pinning opponent's left arm with his right, and aiming short strikes with his left. The long sword was useless at this close range, in other words, the opponent's right arm was already considered dead.

At least, that was how it was supposed to be.

The smashing sensation that came from his left fist had dissipated because something pushed it from above. It was Kirito's open right hand, with all his fingers spread.

"Wha....."

W-Where is the sword!?

When that question arose, the next phenomenon had already happened.

The smooth, but terribly fast movement of Kirito's right fist, now touched Haruyuki's chest, suddenly emitting an orange light.

S-Special.....move!!

But, without a weapon——!?

The development was far beyond his expectations, his reaction was just a moment late. But it was too slow in the ultra speed battle.

Don!! With a great impact against the chest, Haruyuki was repelled backward.

However, there the damage was no big deal. It was probably just a move to create some distance. *Just to use this, he chose to drop the sword? Then, I won't give him a chance to pick it back up.*

To Haruyuki, who was hastily closing the distance back in, a further unexpected development happened in front of his eyes.

The empty handed Kirito made a big jump forward. While in the air, Kirito's right hand brandished over his head.

He is trying to pull another sword from his back? No, there is not enough time for that. Then he's going to attack using his hand to chop? Such an attack won't be able to pierce my armor.....

No.

The light which wrapped the right hand still didn't disappear. It meant the special move was still ongoing——

Both Haruyuki's legs went stiff, stopping the retreat he succeeded in earlier. In front of Haruyuki's eyes, Kirito's right hand grabbed on to something.

It was the sword grip. He didn't drop the sword on the ground. He threw it up above.

By the time Haruyuki realized it, the long sword was already wrapped in the color of blinding flame, and it cut down in a straight line.

He couldn't avoid or guard this time. A huge shock went through his chest from the attack on the left shoulder, Haruyuki was swallowed by a light effect and an explosion, then flew diagonally to the back and right.

"Body-sword composite sword skill, «Meteor Fall».But even saying so, he wouldn't hear it anyway."

I muttered while rubbing my abdomen which was hit earlier.

While it wasn't at the same level as if it happened in real world, the strength of the feedback from the pain should be enough to be considered illegal. Just from this pain alone proved this place wasn't in any game operated in year 2026 Japan.

But, with the big move finally making a clean hit, Silver Crow who was blown away in a flashy fashion and whose body was currently half buried under the rubble should have felt more pain. Of course, if a nervous system existed under that metal armor, that is.

Confirming with a glance at the stamina gauge, eating the punch and the knee at that close range took about 15 percent, and Crow's was reduced by nearly 30 percent. Even though it looked like a metal robot, its defense wasn't that high, just like how fighting games were supposed to be.

Then for the fighting game, this difference in damage isn't enough to decide the outcome of the battle. It is not the situation I can relax in just after I got an attack in. Once I decided that, I kicked the ground to follow up with a sneak attack.

Suddenly the silvery body trembled——

The round metal helmet quickly lifted.

I could feel the strong light emitting from both eyes inside it.

Immediately after that, the rubble which buried half the silvery avatar had scattered violently in all directions.

Curling clouds of dust blown up by the wind covered the surroundings. I corrected my sword stance at this distance, waiting for my vision to clear up.

The chilled wind from the bottom of the stage carried the dust away.

Several seconds later, the trace of collapsed buildings appeared again —— but there was no trace of Silver Crow.

"What.....?"

I quickly looked left and right, my sides and my back was a huge open space, in front of me was the wide three-storey building. If it wasn't so tattered and decayed, this could be seen as a small scale school.

All the windows and entrances of the building were blocked with the metal plates, there were no stairs at the outer walls, so I'd notice if Crow cut across my left or right side. In other words, there should be nowhere to go during the brief moment my vision was blocked by the dust. In that case, where exactly did that silvery robot hide?

——No.

It isn't hidden. The special move gauge below Silver Crow's stamina gauge is around 30% charged, and even now it's still slowly decreasing. It means he's using the special move. I guess it was the reason he disappeared from my vision. Probably the power to go under the ground? Or the power of transparency?.....

I tensed up all my senses from below my feet, front, back, left, and right. Lowering my waist, softly setting up my sword, I readied my stance to intercept an attack from any direction, waiting for an action.

But.

Where Silver Crow appeared from was beyond my expectations.

Noticing something shining above my head, I quickly looked up

Then I saw it, the protruding sharp right toe, swooping down as if it was a spear from the silvery white avatar, with the big metal fins expanded to the left and right, shining dazzlingly on its back.

So that was really its propulsion equipment. But it shouldn't have the high-speed mobility to move its body above the ground to that degree.

Then those fins are —— wings!

I kicked the ground with as much force as possible to jump to the right.

But the Crow diving in a straight line used the stabilizers on both arms to change its angle, perfectly matching my movement.

"Guh....."

While I let leak the voice, the sword in my right hand tried to parry the sharp toe.

But, defending against the attack with that degree of weight wasn't possible. Just like when receiving a heavy rush from the Salamander in ALO^[7] —— No, with greater force than the sword at that time, the dive kick directly hit my right shoulder.



For Silver Crow, who spent all of his level-up bonuses on expanding his flying ability, his greatest weapon is a swooping attack from high altitudes.

Just that would allow it to hit? Over the long period of time, Haruyuki had earnestly researched the technique for the half a year since becoming a Burst Linker. Although it was still too soon to be considered complete, it had become a very important asset of his.

Power, or descending speed, and accuracy, or homing capability, both present together.

All the power of the wings was used for acceleration, while the arms and body did the orbit adjustment. To get the hang of it, he couldn't count how many times he had bitten the ground in vain.

However, the effort wasn't fruitless. He was able to capture Kirito, despite his formidable reaction speed.

——*No.*

Haruyuki shook the head in his mind. The dive kick directly hit the right shoulder, while on the ground, unable to escape, but his eyes could still follow Haruyuki's action.

Apparently, Kirito didn't know Silver Crow was an aerial type Duel Avatar. For those Burst Linkers he fought on a daily basis, the moment they lost sight of Haruyuki in the cloud of dust, they would be cautious above their heads, rather than the surroundings. But Kirito did the opposite, which opened the opportunity for Haruyuki's kick to hit. Thinking about it, the reaction ability to attempt to step and parry at that moment was really frightening.

Glancing at the HP gauge to confirm, Kirito's HP was just below 50 percent and had changed to yellow. Although the amount of damage had reversed the situation, but because the opponent already knows of his flying ability, it would be difficult for Haruyuki's kick to get a clean hit again. If that was the case, then he couldn't stop his hand now.

Haruyuki spread his wings for the second time, he started a low altitude dash towards the shadow crouching on the ground.

Kirito's sword manipulating arm was hit with the big move. The shock reverberating in his nerves should remain for at least ten more seconds, he wouldn't be able to swing the sword at full speed till then. Then, with this rush, the result of this battle will be decided!

"U.....oo!!"

With a short roar, Haruyuki got close to Kirito, then swung a big roundhouse kick diagonally upwards.

The method of using wings wasn't just swooping from high altitudes. At short range melee, the three dimensional actions, ignoring the gravity and inertia, was possible. This kick was also impossible to deal with.

The growl released from his right feet, which looked like a laser cutting across the space.

Of course, Kirito's right hand didn't move.

Sure hit——!!

While Haruyuki felt confident, at that moment,

Both of Kirito's eyes behind his long bangs shone brightly.

The left hand wrapped behind the black leather coat became hazy and disappeared.

KIAaan!! The high-pitched crashing sound. The blinding spark. Then the searing heat sensation.

The mid-air kick was repelled, then Haruyuki slapped down to the ground due to the returning momentum. He understood what had happened at that point.

In Kirito's left hand, which was still on his knee, raised high with the bright white shining like cat's eye^[8], was a second sword.

The swordsman dressed in black stood up while still swaying, in both of his hands were the white and black long swords moving in an arc——

With a JyaKiiin!, Both hands let out the clear sound.

I must admit.

I just had witnessed the opponent, Silver Crow's, endless power.

That name was so suitable with its meaning, the avatar's potential was mostly based on its flying ability. In other word, in ALO, it was what allowed me to press my advantage over the air raid ability specialists, Sylphs, in the aerial combat.

If that was the case, I would like to settle this battle with a mid-air combat. However, now my avatar isn't the Spriggan Kirito in ALO, but the SAO's Dual Blades Kirito. There were no wings on my back, and of course I couldn't fly.

In that case, if I don't squeeze all I have to use in this fight, there would be no chance of winning.

Thoughts about this battle being the result from the abnormality of the quantum circuit had disappeared from my mind. My whole body was wrapped around with the tension I've tasted dueling with truly formidable foes.

It had been one and a half years since feeling the trustworthy weight of the Elucidator in my right hand, and the Dark Repulser in my left. I slowly stood and stared wordlessly to the silvery white avatar.

The pale sparks scattered all over the deep wounds at its chest and left foot, around 40 percent of its HP bar remained. Thin smoke smoldered from the right shoulder, my bar had a similar amount.

However, there were still some tricks under the sleeves on both sides, the victor shall be decided by the following clash.

The wings on the back of Silver Crow stretched wide.

Watching the mild silhouette of «Kirito», who was carrying two swords in standing position, Haruyuki finally realized the true identity of the pressure he felt since the beginning of the battle.

It was similar.

To the pressure from the Black King, «Black Lotus».

More than the form of both swords, or wearing color on the whole body, the most similarity was the «Immeasurable».

Truthfully, Haruyuki almost never watched KuroyukiHime fighting at her full power. From his memories, once conducted in the unlimited neutral field, in the battle against the similarly level 9 Yellow King^[9], that time had left him with the impression that both sides still had spare energy left.

That feeling of bottomless strength. If this person had become seriously serious, just what kind of fury would be unleashed?

The same thing could be felt here, what this Burst Linker Kirito had behind his back.

——*What if this guy really is as strong as KuroyukiHime-senpai, I won't have any chance to win.*

Haruyuki's mind was so determined.

But why was the inside of his chest armor full of wounds burning hot? It wouldn't cool down at all. Far from that, it even blazed more and more, sending heat to the tip of his limbs.

I want to fight. Burn all of Silver Crow and then all of Arita Haruyuki to the exhausting limit, I want to beat this strong foe.

Recalling the moment when the slowly walking figure of the dual blades swordsman caused him to unintentionally shout Burst Out in fear, a subtle smile floated under the silver mask.

It might seemed like the difference in numerical potential of avatars was big, but he was bad at manipulating his consciousness efficiently. Kirito was one step ahead in the ability to analyse situation and ability to react. Even though it was just their first meeting, Haruyuki had ended up behind on everything.

In that case, the only way was to bet on the cornerstone of his humble self-confidence, his «Speed».

Believe in the wings on the back, produced from the craving for speed. Concentrate.

".....Cross it. Go beyond it."

Just as he murmured, the hue of his field of vision had shifted slightly.

The background noise disappeared, and the movement of the sparks drifting in the air became gradually slower.

However, he didn't sense these changes, as all of Haruyuki's spirit was focused on his dual bladed opponent.

«Silver Crow»'s spirit's state had changed, I felt that fact.

Probably, the opponent also determined this as the climax of the battle. The wings on the back opened wide, but he didn't take off, just slowly lowering his waist and setting up both his hands, a natural posture to receive my attack.

Betting everything on the line, where all hope was placed.

I finally noticed I made a blurred thin smile on my mouth.

I really longed for this kind of battle. I might have been in many serious battles in ALO or GGO, and even have trouble surviving in a few of those, but up until now there was never a time I tasted the pain from the sense of tension before.

It was really strange. I wasn't sure why Silver Crow and I were fighting in the first place. It was only the experimental machine's troubles that had led to the accidental encounter with him but——

.....No.

That is why, how to say it? The battle wasn't in the well known game, and everything was wrapped under mysterious circumstances, causing me to feel excited.

It wasn't just that. Carrying the [KIRITO] name tag, holding my beloved swords in both hands, being half hearted was not allowed.

".....From here on, you'd better go all out."

I uttered in a low whisper——

My right foot made a big step forward, readying the sword skill motion.

Both swords were bathed in a vivid orange light.

At the next moment, I started a long distance charge, aiming at Silver Crow like a bullet fired from a cannon.

Dual blades rush sword skill, «Double Circular».

The shape of Kirito, who was controlling the trajectory of the twin shining swords which penetrated the depth of the darkness, like a flame from a fire dragon.

He kicked his fear of wanting to flee to the sky away, Haruyuki just waited.

His consciousness had been geared up to the limit, but it all happened in just the blink of an eye.

In front of Haruyuki, Kirito's body rotated upward. The black sword in his right hand pulled the helix of the flame from below and slashed straight up furiously.

The point of the sword split Haruyuki's left hand's armor open and bounced it upwards.

Silver Crow's wrist armor possessed the highest strength of the entire body. Despite that, the sword ripped the arm apart in the middle, the pretty sparks from the slash wound flowed into the night sky.

"Ku.....!"

Haruyuki leaked a voice that came from his throat through his mouth, but the lethal attack would be the following strike.

Following right behind the slashing trail remaining in mid-air, the white sword in Kirito's left hand thrust in a straight line. The tip was aimed with fearful accuracy at his neck, it was much faster than the attacks from any previous confrontation with Burst Linkers —— be it bullets or laser.

Haruyuki's aim was to catch hold of that blade.

However, he couldn't see any possibility of success at all. Even avoiding it wasn't allowed, it would be accurate to say it was an attack at the speed of god.

Therefore, Haruyuki decided to spread his palm, at the risk of losing his right hand —— used the center of his palm to catch the tip of the sword.

He felt all the resistance of the sword piercing his hand, but continued stretching. The speed of the thrust dropped just slightly, however, it gave Haruyuki a moment of opportunity to twist his neck away. The weak vibration transmitted from the right side of his neck, the blade deeply cut there and split out at the back.



Stamina gauge is, 10 percent remaining.

This bet is——

My win!!

As his consciousness shouted, Haruyuki used his right palm which was penetrated by the sword to grab Kirito's left hand.

"U.....oooo!!"

Yelling, both feet kicked the ground, both wings slapped the air, Haruyuki's fully charged special move gauge was burnt to exhaustion to let him fly into the night sky.

In the midst of full acceleration, he turned his body around. The momentum of inertia was still positive, he then threw Kirito's body above down with all his might.

The sword was extracted from the palm, along with a thin line of sparks. Without the violently built up momentum, the dual blades swordsman without wings was no longer ascending.

In that situation, what surprised him was, there was no sign of struggle from the swordsman at all. His limbs weren't twirling, both hands and feet were spread out, trying to control his posture.

However——

Once this happened, there was nothing he could do.

Most Burst Linkers might not be aware of the basic rule governing physical attacks, which was the reaction to the action.

Be it a punch or kick, sword or blunt weapon, the foot must be firmly planted, without a ground of mass to place a foot onto, power wouldn't arise. This was the reason melee attacks were weak in the «Ice and Snow» stage, where the ground under the feet was abnormally slippery.

Then in mid-air, there was no ground.

Even if Kirito swings the sword, the blade will not have that formidable power anymore.

On the other hand, Haruyuki could use driving force from the wings to kick the air. So even if both strike each other, he should be able to do a lot more damage.

"Now....."

Losing the ascending momentum, staring at Kirito's silhouette once it reached the topmost point, Haruyuki yelled.

"Is the endddddddddd!!!"

Douuu, the sound of air rang in the ears.

He put his right foot as the pivot point for the rushing momentum, and shot off a long ranged roundhouse kick.

Kirito tried to intercept it using his left sword, however his defence was abruptly bounced back with a high-pitched sound, the kicked pierced deeply into his flank.

Haruyuki then dashed after the black dressed figure which flowed down through the air like a bullet. His next attack was deflected by the crossing hands, he then headbutt using his helmet. Along with a heavy impact, it violently hit the center of Kirito's chest.

At this point, the stamina gauge of both sides had 10 percent remaining.

The aerial gauge had less remaining. But it was just enough to spend on the next decisive attack.

Exerting as much power as possible in his right fist, Haruyuki began the final rush.

At that moment——

Both Kirito's eyes suddenly widened. Haruyuki noticed his longcoat which was streaming violently over the entire body, wrapped in a thin red aura.

The black long sword in the right hand was enveloped in a blood-like crimson light.

——*Special move!*

——*I don't fear it!!*

Haruyuki clenched his teeth, and continued straight in. *That was just a long range thrusting attack, but during mid-air with no ground to step on, with the body flowing backwards. That kind of move wouldn't go through Silver Crow's armor!*

"U.....o.....!"

Haruyuki roared. In front of his vision,

Kirito's body turned around.

Giiin! With a loud jet engine-like sound, the tremendous power could be felt vividly from the straight thrusting move fired from the right hand, brightly penetrating the night sky.

——Approaching Haruyuki, in exactly the opposite direction.

"Wh....."

Kirito's body received reaction from the strong thrusting attack and retorted ferociously towards a gasping Haruyuki.

The sword in his left hand glazed the glistening pallid crescent moon in Haruyuki's vision——

Cut into the center of the chest. Haruyuki could feel both hot and cold at the same time where the point of the sword touched.

————*What's with this guy.*

All the remaining special gauge was used not on the attack but to get the driving force for a single moment.

Admiration crossed his mind. But at the same time, Haruyuki's consciousness attempted a final counterattack.

The right fist pushed straight across the sword trail. But the reach wasn't enough. He then reflexively stretching his fingertips, making the shape of a hand-knife. The sharp fingers lined up, glistening white like a sword.

————*Reach it!! At least, I'll convey my final struggle until the end!!*

The white sword pierced through Silver Crow's chest.

Silvery fingertips touched Kirito's coat.

At that moment, Kirito's avatar soundlessly changed into white light particles.

The sword which lost its substance went past Haruyuki's body, Haruyuki's right hand also passed through Kirito's body.

Both of them made contact in mid-air, the bodies blended together.

In the passing moment, Haruyuki felt a sound within his head. A soft, yet dignified, and comfortable voice resounded.

『It was a good duel. Someday —— let's fight again.』

Then, the mysterious Burst Linker «Kirito» body vanished from the imagination field.

In Haruyuki's center of vision, for the first time he sees, the system message [DISCONNECTION] blinking.

".....iichan. Onii-chan!"

I raised my gaze to the source of the voice, on the other side of the table, from the sharp lips of Suguha.

"Ah, s-sorry. What was it again?"

"Since just now that your hand hasn't moved much at all, isn't the food good? That was what I asked!"

To Suguha who made a sully look once more, I quickly shook my head.

"T-That's not it. It's delicious, this oden. [\[10\]](#)"

I filled my large open mouth with a potato, and showed a nodding gesture, but Suguha's mood wasn't getting better.

".....This isn't oden though, it's Pot-au-feu. [\[11\]](#)"

——*Pot-au-feu with whole eggs only, huh*, of course that thought didn't leave my mouth. I quickly emptied the plate and asked for a refill, trying to settle the mood.

Our mother was late as usual, so today's dinner was just me and Suguha. At that point I went back into silence, causing the table to be quiet again. But while eating seconds of the french-style oden, my thoughts were pulled back to the experience of the strange incident which occurred this afternoon once more.

It was about four hours ago, at the mysterious battle game field, the serious battle with the unknown avatar «Silver Crow» had unfolded, but regrettably just before the result would be decided, my connection was cut off.

I told Higa Takeru about what happened after jumping out of the experimental machine.

However, Higa had a doubtful face about the fact, so I connected back into that game, this time for the exchanging of information rather than sword and fist.

What I saw in the second Dive was —— as described in the beginning, just a scene of a lovely forest. There was no stamina gauge nor time count on the field of vision, the battle opponent also wasn't present. After we took the data as planned, Higa and the other staff also Dived just in case, but no one saw the mysterious human shadow at all.

So, the quantum circuit of the experimental machine was somehow «Fixed». It could be said that the machine was thoroughly satisfied from my battle with Crow.....

That battle was probably just a dream I had from FullDiving in the 4th-generation machine for the first time. And for now, the part-time job was over, Higa told me that just as I was about to leave the laboratory.

However, I couldn't believe such explanation, from the Silver Crow's splendid movements, the flame of fighting spirit burning at an ultra-high temperature, to the duel which was like to burn each other down, it couldn't be just a dream.

"What are you thinking of for a while now?"

I woke up from my thoughts after hearing Suguha's voice.

So as not to offend her again, and also to get her involved in what was in my mind, I used my fork to pick a Vienna into my mouth, and said,

"Hmm..... Today, I dueled with an amazing opponent. But due to circuit irregularity, I can't say I won....."

"Heh? Onii-chan's battle with an unknown player ended up in a draw? Does such a person exist?"

Attracted to my story, Suguha's body leaned forward. Apparently she thought it had happened in ALO, I left it that way in order to keep the contract I made to not disclose information about the experimental machine.

"How to say it..... Amazing, naturally flying. It was like seeing a real voluntary flight."

".....? What do you mean?"

Suguha tilted her head, while still holding her fork.

"Well, for the voluntary flight in ALO, you really don't just use thoughts to control the wings, it actually requires the use of shoulder blade movement too. During acceleration would be like this....."

I pulled both arms backward, causing both shoulder blades to get closer.

"Then, during deceleration."

This time the arms was stretched out in front, the gap between shoulder blades opened wider.

"With experience, the actual movement can be minimized, but I don't mean it can be completely eliminated. That's why it interfered with the attack during the air raid."

Suguha gave a big nod at my words.

"That's right. When swinging the sword, stretching the arm cannot be avoided and at the same time, it acts as a brake command to the wings too. The attack which completely kills the momentum of a full speed flight, only the lance type weapon is an exception due to its stance being based on the waist. But that can't be helped anyway, because humans don't have real wings, so we have to substitute it with some part of the body."

"Yeah..... But that guy could move his limbs without causing any conflict with the wings at all. Even during the fierce full speed dash, he could still accelerate while throwing the fist forward."

"Ehh—, something like that can't be possible."

I show a slight smile to Suguha who made the rounded eyes.

"Yeah, it's not possible. Maybe it was too fast to notice..... Or he wasn't human but a birdman so he could operate the wings separately, something like that....."

———In that world, something exceeding my understanding of a man-machine interface existed.

Yes..... Perhaps, unlike the AmuSphere which picked up the body's movement commands from the medulla oblongata^[12], it read the image directly from the brain, no, the consciousness.

It couldn't be possible. Consciousness, or rather, to access such things as the soul itself.

But without thinking that way, Silver Crow's movements couldn't be understood.

Changing the image power, that is the human mind, into data, which was the actual power in the real world. Yes, if we think about it, hadn't that experimental machine read my «Self-image» and created the swordsman Kirito's avatar? In other words, Higa's 4th-generation FullDive machine communicated with the soul rather than the brain cell..... It could be said that, in that world, there's the possibility that the Diver can pull out and use the ultimate kind of power, which is the «Mind Power».

I closed my eyes tightly once, then looked at Suguha and finally smiled.

".....W-What are you smiling for, Onii-chan?"

Towards the discomfited Sylph swordswoman, who acts like a possessed speed-holic in the sky, I said,

"By some chance, one day.....no, in the surprisingly near future, we might be able to really fly. Not a pseudo-voluntary flight.....but flapping the wings created by the mind."

Suguha blinked in surprise——

Her whole face smiled cheerfully.

"Yeah, that would be great."

I nodded in return, and bit the Vienna, my mind returned to that figure once more.

Flying across the dark night sky, the beautiful silvery white crow.

".....yuki-kun. Oi, are you listening, Haruyuki-kun?"

He lifted his face in a hurry at the call, as KuroyukiHime emitted a perilous glare on the opposite side of the round white table.

"Ah, s-s-sorry! I was just thinking about something....."

"Ho, I wonder what kind of important consideration has distracted you during this discussion with me."

Haruyuki gulped, and drank iced latte from his paper cut to stall for time.

There were no other students in the quiet cafeteria lounge after school. But Haruyuki still looked around just in case, affirming the conversation wouldn't be heard by anyone else, before mumbling the answer.

"Erm, well, the truth is.....I had fought with a strange Burst Linker....."

Those words intentionally omitted the 'during today's lunch break' part. Furthermore, the lunch break when the unidentified enemy showed up in the school's local network, was comparable to the big «Dusk Taker Incident» which happened in spring. Actually, after that battle, all the members of Nega Nebulas must be warned immediately, but Haruyuki didn't do so as he felt the enemy wasn't real.

Because he felt neither maliciousness nor hostility from that battle opponent. All he could feel from him was excitement and joy. Despite waging a fierce battle, Haruyuki was left with some sort of freshness in his mind.

Maybe he won't show up again.

While he still didn't know why he was so convinced about that, Haruyuki started speaking piece by piece.

".....It was weird, but he was amazing. His weapons were two swords.....Which he could swing as if they were weightless, I was almost unable to track his special moves."

"Two.....swords."

KuroyukiHime furrowed her small eyebrows while murmuring to herself. But she stared blankly at Haruyuki then immediately returned to her normal facial expression while encouraging him to continue.

"No, there's nothing. Then? Did you win?"

"Ah, well.....he was disconnected just before the conclusion.....but, if it continued, I am sure I would lose. My final attack probably couldn't reach him."

"Ho. Being able to defeat you in close combat. What's the color and level of that person?"

Haruyuki shook his head with a troubled face to KuroyukiHime's question.

"About that, either it was a system error or he used some kind of a filter..... color name and level were both not shown. Just the color of his appearance was, well....., really black."

Towards the «Black King» who narrowed her eyes again, Haruyuki didn't think too deeply into her reaction, and threw the question he had thought of during the battle at her.

"Oh, senpai. I wanted to ask this for a long time now, what are the characteristics of the «Black»?"

KuroyukiHime blinked blankly then showed a big bitter smile.

"Suddenly asking such a question...Haruyuki-kun."

"Eh? No, erm, s-sorry!"

Haruyuki unintentionally shrank the upper part of his body, this time a smile which was like from an intelligent older sister towards her younger brother, floated on KuroyukiHime's face.

"No, there was no need to apologize. Because, to that question, «I also do not know»."

".....Heh?"

"That said, there will be a certain degree I'll have to guess."

The glass containing iced tea made a ringing sound, KuroyukiHime stared at the pale afternoon sunlight, then explained,

"The three primary colors on the upper part of the color circle..... «Neighboring Blue», «Remote Red», and «Indirect Yellow». And then there are properties in the middle «Green» and «Purple». With the exception of metal colors, almost all of the Duel Avatars are

classified somewhere between those links. As the purity of the color goes higher, the characteristic purity also increases."

Up until that point was what Haruyuki already understood. For example, his friend Cyan Pile had a fairly bright blue color which slightly tilted in the purple direction. So his initial equipment «Pile Driver» was combined with the ranged attack power.

Seeing Haruyuki nod in response, KuroyukiHime continued,

"Conversely, as the color purity lowers so does the characteristic purity. For your friend «Ash Roller», he is more like the green than the grey type. That is because he spent most of his potential into strengthening the exterior of his unique bike. At the same time the purity of his color had declined. But why an avatar's color is darkened, while another is brightened, I still can't give a proper explanation yet."

"Become darker.....or brighter....."

Repeatedly murmuring, Haruyuki finally understood. When an avatar's color rapidly darkened, the destination was surely black —— the «Pure Black». And conversely, white existed, the «Pure White», when going brighter as well. It was probably very unique on both extreme ends, but he couldn't understand clearly the reason behind the divide of both black and white being the exact opposite.

While Haruyuki twisted his neck, KuroyukiHime suddenly murmured,

"«Black» is the «Rejected Color» —— It's what I've been aware of for a long time."

"Eh....., r-rejected.....?"

"Yes, refused to be dyed in any color, the color of possessing nothingness, it couldn't go anywhere else other than that, the bottom of the deep well of color....."

With those desolate words, KuroyukiHime shook her head before Haruyuki could speak. Then her light colored lips showed a faint smile.

"But....., just but. Maybe it isn't really that way, recently I started to think like that, thus....."

Suddenly she moved her delicate right hand over the luxurious table, and grabbed hold of Haruyuki's left hand, causing him to be taken aback.

".....Because you had held my hand many times. This me who couldn't interact with other people, always reminding me."

Haruyuki's face was red to his ears from the unusually gentle pupils gazing at him, he gripped her cold hand in return and would not let go. His heart throbbing, but unable to say a decent

line, he just grabbed her hand as if trying to pass his earnest feelings from his heart with the touch of the fingers.

——*Black is absolutely not the rejected color. Because it was you, without a doubt, who stretched her hand to me who was alone in the bottom of the well, who gently wrapped and healed my wounds.*

——*That's right, that guy was the same.*

——*That black swordsman was also had a similar tranquility. Receiving everything, both giving great support and strength.*

Haruyuki felt the «Kirito» inside his mind was pushing his back, he timidly lifted his face, and somehow managed to speak.

"Erm....., well, black objects don't reflect any light, causing it to look black, it is what I learned in class. So.....so, it surely isn't the lonely color. I think it's the warmest color, more than any other color."

KuroyukiHime widened her eyes for a moment—— then,

A beautiful smile floated on her face like a blooming lotus bud.

Guest Illustrator / abec

Translator's Notes & References

1. ↑ A major shopping area in Tokyo for electronic, computer, anime, and otaku goods.
2. ↑ (-_-|||
3. ↑ One of the design approach used in software engineering, for more details please visit [wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design_patterns)
4. ↑ Refers to [Sword Art Online Volume 1, Chapter 2](#)
5. ↑ KuroyukiHime (黒雪姫) lit. Snow Black Princess was a word play on 白雪姫 or Snow White Princess, it was her handle name/alias and not her real name. Up until this point her real name is still hidden by the author.
6. ↑ 対戦型格闘ゲーム(taisengataKAKUtoGE-mu), 'fighting game', short for カクゲー
7. ↑ Refers to his fight with General Eugene in Volume 3 - Fairy Dance chapter 4.
8. ↑ A retroreflective safety device used in road marking.
9. ↑ Refers to [Accel World Volume 2, Chapter 6](#).
10. ↑ a Japanese winter dish consisting of several ingredients such as boiled eggs, daikon radish, konnyaku, and processed fish cakes stewed in a light, soy-flavoured dashi broth.
11. ↑ 'Pot on the fire', a french beef stew.
12. ↑ A lower section of the brainstem, governing cardiac, respiratory, vomiting and vasomotor centers and deals with autonomic, involuntary functions, such as breathing, heart rate and blood pressure.